

Medical Reserve Corps Offers Volunteer Opportunities

By Cmdr. Robert J. Tosatto and Lt. Marna L. Hoard



MRC civilian volunteers learn how to use a fire extinguisher correctly as part of a fire safety module during a community emergency response training class. Photo by Lori Driscoll

The terrorist attacks on September 11th, the anthrax mailings and the quadruple hurricanes that hit the southeastern U.S. in the summer of 2004 all exhausted the resources of local response agencies. These events have served as wake-up calls and, coupled with the deterioration of the public health infrastructure in recent years, have highlighted the need to have a cadre of volunteers ready and available who can assist local authorities with regularly occurring health initiatives and also in meeting health needs during responses to emergencies.

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The Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) program provides a nationwide system for the establishment of local teams of volunteers—mostly medical and public health professionals—who can supplement their local community's resources year round and in times of great need. Launched in July 2002 and housed in the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, the MRC program focuses on strengthening local public health capabilities and preparing communities for emergencies. MRC units give medical and public health volunteers an organized approach to offer their professional skills in support of their local communities, while also expanding local partnership networks through a commitment to community-wide coordination.

Those interested in establishing an MRC unit in their community are encouraged to talk to all the community partners (e.g., public health, emergency management, hospitals, city government, police and fire) to obtain buy-in. In addition, newly formed MRC units are encouraged to assess the health needs of their community and develop their unit's mission and goals according to the needs and risks of their community. Some units are involved solely in either emergency preparedness or public health activities; others have a mixture of both. No matter what the program's mission, MRC units are working within their communities to make them healthier, stronger, and more prepared.

MRC volunteers can come from various backgrounds—physicians, nurses, pharmacists, EMTs, paramedics and other health professionals are encouraged to join. However, volunteers do not necessarily have to be medical or public health professionals, as many local MRC units utilize the skills and

expertise of non-medical volunteers as interpreters, chaplains, legal advisors and others to meet the needs of their communities. MRC units throughout the country have recognized the need for a wide variety of volunteers to tackle the multitude of health challenges that communities face.

MRC units can participate in a variety of local public health activities, such as diabetes screening, smoking cessation, and immunization programs. They also help the community to prepare for emergencies. For example, volunteers from more than 30 MRCs across the country responded in some way to the needs of local communities after the 2004 and 2005 hurricanes. MRC members supplemented local hospitals facing critical personnel shortages, manned first aid stations and served in FEMA customer relations positions. They also supported local evacuation efforts, provided disaster mental health services and helped with logistics for service centers to assist local flood victims.


As one of the partner programs of the Department of Homeland Security's Citizen Corps program, the MRC works closely with Citizen Corps and its partner organizations and affiliates to develop programs that promote citizen and community preparedness. One such partnership that has developed is with the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC). Some MRC units are working in cooperation with the NVFC "Heart Healthy Firefighter" program to provide service to their communities' firefighters.

Local MRC units are bridging the gap between community response partners, and there are many new and innovative collaborations being

formed every day. It is vital for local medical, public health and emergency response professionals to be involved in the establishment of MRC units and to sustain them so they continue to meet the community's health and safety needs.

More than 48,000 volunteers participate in almost 300 MRC units in 48 states, the District of Columbia, the US Virgin Islands and Guam. The MRC Program Office works with public health, emergency management and medical leaders across the nation to encourage the formation of MRC units in local communities. The program office strives to facilitate the establishment and implementation of MRC units nationwide, and it functions as a clearinghouse for community information and best practices. Its role is to help communities achieve their local visions for public health and emergency preparedness and response.

The Medical Reserve Corps continues to grow as more communities discover this resource to help improve their public health and emergency response capacity. Along with this growth, MRC units are adopting more broad-based public health initiatives, specifically those that are aligned with the public health priorities of the U.S. Surgeon General - increasing disease prevention efforts, enhancing emergency preparedness, eliminating health disparities and improving health literacy.

For more information, visit www.medicalreservecorps.gov, e-mail MRCcontact@osophs.dhhs.gov or call (301) 443-4951. 

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